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Sustainable land use and transport planning: submission to draft National Planning Framework



Opening statement

The Community Road Safety Action & Information Network (Cosain) is a community group that was formed in 2009 with the aim of making Galway a safe, sustainable and sociable environment for pedestrians and other people who travel by means other than the private car. Cosain seeks to emulate the successful approach adopted by organisations such as Living Streets in the UK and the international body Walk 21, and endorses documents such as the European Charter of Pedestrian Rights and the International Charter for Walking. One of the core principles of the International Charter is that “communities have the right to expect authorities to provide for, support and safeguard their ability and choice to walk.”

The Irish word for footpath is *cosán* (plural *cosáin*). The Irish verb *cosain* means to protect. The overall aim of Cosain is to protect and promote the rights, safety and comfort of pedestrians. As a member of the Galway City Community Forum, Cosain's vision is for vibrant, supportive and strong neighbourhoods and communities where people can and do choose to walk wherever possible, and where the competent authorities ensure a Level of Service that provides universal access to public spaces that are safe and welcoming, for children, older people and disabled people especially.

Our urban areas have become very car dependent and much less accessible for pedestrians, cyclists and users of public transport. In addition to creating traffic congestion with its many associated problems, car dependence has greatly contributed to the emergence of more carbon-intensive and sedentary lifestyles. The most significant increase in carbon emissions since 1990 has been in the transport sector, while physical inactivity is a major factor in growing levels of obesity and preventable illness.

Universally accessible neighbourhoods and urban spaces are essential to encourage and enable people to walk, cycle and use public transport. Walking and cycling are associated with positive health outcomes, improved fitness and better physical, social and mental health. Making cities universally accessible provides many environmental, social and economic co-benefits.

Neighbourhoods in which people walk and cycle are more welcoming and inclusive, creating a stronger sense of community and social cohesion. People who live in areas universally accessible to walking and cycling are more likely to know their neighbours, participate in community endeavour as active citizens, trust others and be socially engaged. When people can circulate freely, alone and in company, there is also a stronger sense of safety, security and mutual support.

Traffic volume and speed is an obvious and well-recognised barrier to walking for school travel, work commuting, public transport access, leisure, health and community connectedness. Children and their parents walking or cycling to school especially have to cope with objective or subjectively felt barriers that restrict and limit their mobility and their desire for active travel. The traffic circumstances should be adapted to these road users, instead of the other way around.

Cosain submits that, in the context of gradually increasing population and ongoing growth in the Irish economy, it is essential that Government policy does not prioritise private motorised travel, as has previously been the case for many years. It is evident that decision-makers can no longer facilitate fossil-fuel-dependent private car-based travel while addressing climate change and providing for pedestrians, cyclists, public transport and the mobility of essential goods and services. “A continuation of ‘business as usual’ will not deliver the national vision and goals we all share” (Minister Simon Coveney TD, 2017).

The function of passenger transport is to move people, not to move vehicles. To address the exigencies of climate change and to encourage more sustainable travel patterns, policymakers must place pedestrians and cyclists at the top of the transport hierarchy. Walking is the most sustainable form of transport, and all journeys begin and end on foot. By prioritising urban planning and design for pedestrians first, the number of journeys taken by car can be reduced and public transport made more accessible. A walkable urban environment is a prerequisite for an accessible, reliable, efficient, well-used and sustainable public transport system. Walking and cycling also improve health and well-being and provide greater opportunities for civic interactions that help to promote neighbourliness, community and shared purpose.

Towards low-carbon sustainable mobility

The objective of transport planning should be to optimise the mobility of people, not to speed up the movement of motor vehicles. Car dependence results from a self-reinforcing cycle of car-oriented transport planning, increased car ownership, reduced travel options and more dispersed car-oriented land use patterns.

Land use and transportation planning in Ireland has suffered from a lack of long-term strategic vision, and for decades has been trapped in a continuing cycle of road-based car-oriented development. The present Government's policy to date does not provide reassurance that the necessary paradigm shift has yet occurred.

Despite the rhetoric of numerous local and national policy documents, local authorities as well as various government departments and agencies have for many years pursued mutually incompatible and collectively unsustainable land use and transportation planning agendas. Low-density sprawl in the suburbs and 'measles development' in rural areas has led inevitably to car dependence, traffic congestion and lack of public transport, and has made walking and cycling impractical or unattractive for many people. Central government and local authorities have jointly and individually failed to implement coherent traffic, transportation and spatial planning strategies on the necessary scale.

To encourage more sustainable travel patterns, central government, local authorities and state agencies must place public transit, cycling and walking at the top of the transport hierarchy. Walking is the most sustainable form of transport, and all journeys begin and end on foot. By prioritising urban planning and design for pedestrians first, the number of short journeys taken by car can be reduced and public transport made more accessible. A walkable urban environment is a prerequisite for an accessible, reliable, efficient and well-used public transport system. Such an integrated approach would be a paradigm shift, but is entirely consistent with well-established European policy as well as international trends in sustainable development and transportation planning.

Sustainable towns and cities have a high concentration of people living in an environment that is pleasant and which provides good social infrastructure through good physical infrastructure (Institute of Transportation & Development Policy, 2015). The mobility of people is prioritised above the movement of cars, allowing residents, workers and visitors, according to ability, to safely walk or cycle to their daily activities. Jobs, schools, shops and services are easily accessible by public transport, and the time and money otherwise spent driving can be used productively elsewhere.

These are the kinds of urban centres that are attractive to people today – low-carbon liveable cities with less congestion, less pollution, fewer accidents, and healthier, safer, more productive communities. To achieve this vision, the ITDP has identified eight principles to guide sustainable transport and development:

1. Develop neighbourhoods that facilitate and promote walking
2. Prioritise non-motorised transport networks
3. Create well-connected networks of streets and paths
4. Locate developments near high-quality public transport
5. Plan for mixed use development
6. Optimise density and transport capacity
7. Create compact urban areas with short commutes
8. Increase mobility by regulating parking and road use.

The EU policy context: a mandate for a change in direction

Achieving sustainable, energy-efficient and environmentally friendly transport systems is one of the European Union's key aims, and therefore local development plans must be fully aligned with this major objective as well as with other relevant policies.

In 2007 the European Commission published a green paper, "Towards a New Culture for Urban Mobility". The green paper established the foundations of a new European policy agenda for sustainable urban mobility, and identified five key challenges that must be overcome:

- Traffic congestion, which creates negative economic, health, environmental and social impacts
- Dependence on fossil fuels, creating CO₂ and other polluting emissions (as well as noise), which contribute significantly to climate change and impact negatively on air quality and human health
- Increasing freight and passenger flows, combined with limited possibility to expand transport infrastructure due to lack of suitable space and the need for sustainable development, all of which requires smarter and more efficient urban transport systems
- Accessibility to the urban mobility systems and services, which needs to be of high quality, ie efficient, fast, frequent, comfortable, reliable, safe, flexible, affordable and accessible to the more vulnerable groups (eg elderly, children, people with disabilities, pregnant women) but which can be complicated by urban sprawl
- Safe and secure urban transport: about two-thirds of road accidents and one-third of road fatalities takes place in urban areas with the most vulnerable road users being pedestrians and cyclists. In order to improve this situation, possible solutions must cover behavioural, vehicle and infrastructure aspects as well as strict enforcement of traffic rules.

The Green Paper states that, in order to be effective, transport policies need to be based on "an approach which is as integrated as possible, combining the most appropriate responses to each individual problem: technological innovation, the development of clean, safe and intelligent transport systems, economic incentives and amendments to legislation".

Linking local & regional transport plans to EU policy

Underlining the need for a coherent transport strategy, the EU Action Plan on Urban Mobility (2009) states:

An integrated approach can best deal with the complexity of urban transport systems, the governance issues and the links between cities and their surrounding areas or regions, the interdependence between transport modes, the limitations within urban space and the role of urban systems in the wider European transport system. An integrated approach is not only needed for the development of transport infrastructure and services, but also for policy making to link transport with environment protection, healthy environments, land use planning, housing, social aspects of accessibility and mobility as well as industrial policy. Developing strategic, integrated transport planning, establishing appropriate mobility planning organisations and setting realistic targets are essential to address the long-term challenges of urban mobility, while supporting also cooperation with and between transport operators.

Government expenditure on transport — with its long-established focus on road building, the accommodation of private cars and the flow of motorised traffic — is not satisfactorily aligned with the current EU and international sustainable transport policy agenda. The truth about a government's priorities is not evident in its rhetoric or declared aspirations but in its budget. For example, at present less than 1% of Ireland's transport budget is allocated to cycling, yet the United Nations Environment Programme states that governments should allocate at least 20% of their transport budget to Non-Motorised Transport (NMT). Transportation planning therefore requires a new approach which takes cognisance of the need for sustainable mobility at local and regional level and which is fully coherent with EU policy objectives as well as the exigencies of climate change.

Five recommendations for national and city policy makers to save lives, reduce pollution and get cities moving

Take the first step	Introduce a national or city NMT policy if you don't have one. Use our policy checklist as a guideline on what to include. If you do have a policy do you need to revise it?
Budget for NMT	Set aside at least 20% of the total transport budget to fund NMT programmes at national and city level.
Measure the Miles	Set quantifiable and measurable goals, then collect the data you need and evaluate your success. If you don't know if and how your policy is working, you won't know whether you are heading in the right direction. Have the courage to change course.
Work Together	Access and mobility affects everyone and almost every area of our lives. So include a diverse range of stakeholders in your planning and implementation. Ask users where they walk or ride and what they need. Pay particular attention to more vulnerable users, such as women, children, the elderly and people with mobility challenges. Don't try to replicate what other cities or countries do without taking your local context into account
Do as you say	'Political will' is not only about developing and implementing policies, but about actively championing NMT as a mode of equal status to private cars... For as long as NMT is seen as a low-status alternative, it will not receive the road space, budgets and attention it deserves.

Source: United Nations Environment Programme (2016) *Global Outlook on Walking & Cycling*

Expanding the road network is neither effective nor sustainable planning policy

The Government's stated intention is an 80% reduction in carbon emissions by 2050, "setting out a vision for a future smart, green economy in Ireland" (*Investing in our Transport Future - Strategic Investment Framework for Land Transport*, Department of Transport, 2015). According to this framework, transport policy will require a major overhaul in order to achieve this objective:

There will need to be a radical transformation in the transport sector to meet this ambition, embracing modal shift, major technological improvements and better management of transport demand. Investment in the transport sector will be necessary to meet these climate change obligations.

In terms of rhetoric, therefore, the Department of Transport (DTTAS) acknowledges that "getting people out of cars and onto public transport has a key role to play in reducing Ireland's carbon emissions, by providing a viable, less polluting alternative to car and road transport for many journeys" (*Building on Recovery: Infrastructure and Capital Investment 2016-2021*). However, the same strategy document envisages an 83% increase in spending on roads, from €591 million in 2016 to €1.1 billion in 2021, while expenditure on public transport is set to increase from €348 million to €845 million. While the latter is a more substantial increase in percentage terms, the total capital expenditure is significantly lower and must be viewed in the context of [recent funding crises in State-owned public transport services](#). There is also a long-established tendency among State agencies to prioritise infrastructure for private cars. For example, Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), established in 2015 through a merger of the National Roads Authority and the Railway Procurement Agency, mentions neither climate change nor public transport in its submission to the DTTAS *Transport Future* consultation process, focusing instead on maintenance of the current road network and construction of new roads (see figure below).

1) Investment In Pavement Renewals

Investment in pavement renewals to check the deterioration of the national road network and to preserve the value of this asset of strategic national importance and allow it to be optimally exploited in the interests of preserving economic and societal well-being; and

2) Development of "Ready to Tender" Schemes (Beyond "Building on Recovery")

Investment in the timely progression of planning and design stages of priority road projects beyond those listed in "Building on Recovery" to "Ready to Tender" stage to allow the orderly and phased development of the national road network as funding becomes available in improving economic circumstances. This will allow the national road network to fulfil its critical role in consolidating and supporting economic growth and the attainment of associated societal and sustainability goals.

Meanwhile the TII's own *Statement of Strategy 2016-2021* mentions climate change just once (in an Appendix) and assumes that the way to ensure a "more efficient road network" is by "identifying and prioritising bottlenecks" along with "provision of extra capacity, traffic management solutions and measures to smooth and/or reduce peak demand". However, there is strong and consistent evidence that increasing road capacity does not eliminate traffic congestion in the long term, as the additional space is eventually taken up by additional cars and more driving ([a phenomenon known as Generated Traffic or Induced Travel](#)).

Transition to low-carbon transport therefore requires much more efficient use of the existing road network, which of necessity will require a major shift to public transport, cycling and walking. This in turn will enable more effective solutions in terms of traffic management, alleviation of congestion and more efficient use of renewable energy sources.

Climate action and dependence on private cars

According to the Climate Change Advisory Council, the most significant increase in CO₂ emissions since 1990 has occurred in the transport sector (CCAC, Periodic Review 2017). Emissions from this sector therefore need to be significantly reduced, which will involve “a profound transition” in order to reverse the current trend. CCAC believes that this can be achieved through “the adoption of zero and near zero carbon transport options across public and private transport modes and through enhanced transport management systems.”

The popular view is that electric cars are a ‘game changer’ and should be highly incentivised by Government to encourage uptake by consumers. The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland is offering grants of up to €5,000 for a Battery Electric Vehicle (BEV) or a Plug-in Hybrid Electric Vehicle (PHEV) purchased & registered in Ireland. In addition, these vehicles also qualify for VRT relief of up to €5,000 for a BEV & €2,500 for a PHEV, providing a maximum combined subsidy (grant + VRT relief) of €10,000 for BEVs & €7,500 for PHEVs (http://www.seai.ie/Grants/Electric_Vehicle_Grant_Scheme). Despite these substantial subsidies there are demands for additional “sweeteners” such as free recharging, free parking, privileged access to bus lanes, no fee for doing the driving test in an electric car and a zero rate of Motor Tax.

A key consideration is that if road transport is to become independent of fossil fuels, it is essential that electricity production is also carbon free, which may actually be a greater technological challenge than a move to electric cars. Electric cars do not emit CO₂ in use, but in terms of overall environmental impact the entire product lifecycle should be taken into account, which includes the method of electricity generation, the materials and processes used in battery manufacture, and finally recycling. The question of energy efficiency must also be considered, not just with regard to vehicle performance but also in terms of societal mobility, bearing in mind the key principle that the function of passenger transport is to move people, not to move vehicles.

Any meaningful discussion about electric cars and CO₂ emissions must therefore include an explicit recognition that low-occupancy private motorised transport is the least energy-efficient and most environmentally unsustainable mode of travel. Public transport consumes much less energy and emits much less CO₂ per passenger-kilometre, which is a much more important metric. This is especially true at peak travel times, when our public roads are typically clogged with single-occupant private cars.

Electric cars will not solve the inter-related problems of traffic congestion, urban sprawl, environmentally destructive road-building and social inequalities related to transport. Consequently, low-carbon mobility requires a coherent and co-ordinated transport policy framework based on energy-efficient technology, comprehensive environmental protection and sustainable behaviour change. A major reorientation of Government policy towards public transport, cycling and walking is required, as technology alone cannot deliver the necessary changes in the short time frame available for effective climate action.

Modal shift to sustainable transport and active travel will also generate additional dividends in terms of public safety, population health and social capital, all of which must be taken into account when evaluating the costs and benefits of government expenditure in relation to climate change.

Conclusion

The inter-related goals of sustainable land use, prioritisation of public transport and promotion of active travel have implications for the types of infrastructure that we require in future, how we relate to our environment and how we adapt to the exigencies of climate change. The National Planning Framework must ensure a reorientation of government policy away from car dependence, urban sprawl and neglect of public transport towards a new era of ecological, equitable and efficient personal mobility.